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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000473

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI SAYS OFFER IS STILL ON THE
TABLE...AND IS THE BEST MARCH 14 WILL GET

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)

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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 3/30 meeting, Speaker Berri conveyed to the Ambassador his conviction that time is running out for a solution to Lebanon's crisis. If the current stalemate persists into the autumn, the Speaker predicts the emergence of competing national governments and serious instability. He urged the Ambassador to convince "his March 14th friends" to carefully reconsider his last offer, which consists of a committee to settle the issue of the Special Tribunal, followed by a reconfiguration of the Siniora cabinet based upon the 19-11 formula. Berri warned the U.S. to ignore the advice of Walid Jumblatt, whom he claims benefits from chaos in Lebanon. The Speaker indicated that the opposition would be flexible on other issues, such as a new electoral law and presidential elections, but would hold fast on a 19-11 distribution of power. Concerning UNSCR 1747, the Speaker voiced support for the continuation of the international community's effort to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's drive to acquire nuclear arms, because a military attack would "quickly engulf the region" in a war whose limits would be hard to imagine. End summary.

¶2. (C) Speaker Nabih Berri met with the Ambassador and Special Assistant on March 30 at the Speaker's offices in Ain el Tine in south Beirut. Amal MP Ali Bazzi (a U.S. citizen) and senior advisor Ali Hamdan also attended the meeting. Speaker Berri said he was looking forward to meeting U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi on April 2 and seemed temporarily taken aback when reminded that he had turned down a previous meeting with Speaker Pelosi in Beirut last year. Displaying a politician's timing, however, he quickly recovered and "remembered" that last year's meeting was scheduled for a Sunday, which is "simply an impossible" day on which to work.

¶3. (C) Immediately preceding the subject meeting, Speaker Berri had met with visiting UNSYG Ban Ki-moon. When asked how the conversation had gone, Berri smiled and remarked that SYG Ban had said "what you wanted him to say." Turning more serious, Berri indicated the discussion had been wide-ranging and had included the Special Tribunal, reconciliation efforts in Lebanon, UNSCR 1701, arms smuggling across the Syrian border, and the status of the Berri-Hariri talks, which had been suspended just before this week's Arab Summit. Without going into specifics, Berri did state that he had made two requests from the Secretary General: (1) the international

community should force the Lebanese to resolve their problems themselves, and (2) although he recognized the importance of the Special Tribunal, it should not absorb all the attention; there were other serious problems that also had to be addressed as soon as possible. (We heard from UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen that Berri had warned Ban that a Chapter VII approach could destroy Lebanon.)

BERRI SAYS HIS OFFER STILL STANDS

¶4. (C) Beginning with a caution that this could well be the last time he would extend this offer to the March 14th coalition, Berri listed the steps of his proposal to end the crisis: formulation of a four-person committee to discuss and resolve the "reservations" Hizballah currently has with the tribunal; once these differences were resolved, sign a non-negotiable statement that the tribunal would be established. The discussions would then proceed to a reconfiguration of the Council of Ministers (or cabinet) along the 19-11 formula, with public guarantees that the "blocking minority" would not dissolve the government by resigning or withholding the necessary quorum required to conduct business. When both issues were resolved -- the tribunal and the new cabinet -- Speaker Berri would convene a meeting of the 14 principal political leaders in Lebanon to ratify, and not re-negotiate, the two agreements.

¶5. (C) Upon ratification, the opposition's street presence in downtown Beirut would end. The new cabinet would convene and send the agreements to President Lahoud, who would sign immediately, according to Berri. At that point, following the always-complex Lebanese rules of procedure, the two agreements would be introduced to the parliament as laws and, without debate or modification, be put to a simple up-or-down

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vote. Finally, the resulting new tribunal documents would be forwarded to the UN Security Council, which would decide when and where to establish the court. Despite the numerous steps, some of which require a leap of faith that they will be executed quickly (particularly Lahoud's signature, which will surely require a Syrian green light), Speaker Berri was insistent that the entire process could be completed in 7-10 days.

¶6. (C) According to Berri, who was now in high sales mode, nothing could be simpler -- and more fair to all concerned. He argued that his proposal met almost every March 14th demand, except the demand to know beforehand what were Hizballah's long-hidden "minor modifications" to the tribunal documents. The Ambassador pointedly asked that if Hizballah's desired changes were so inconsequential, why the great need for secrecy until the committee was already formed -- something just didn't seem right. Berri wouldn't respond directly, but instead argued that keeping the desired changes secret was reasonable because the opposition had "received

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nothing in return" from March 14th -- an odd answer that elicited nods of approval from MP Bazzi and Ali Hamdan. The Ambassador pointed out that March 14 had already conceded to a 19-10-1 cabinet, conceding to a blocking minority, as well as looking again at the tribunal documents, fairly large concessions.

HARIRI'S ADDITIONAL REQUESTS

¶7. (C) Speaker Berri said that just before the talks were suspended last week, Saad Hariri had made three demands: (1) a public statement from all 14 political leaders, including Hassan Nasrallah, that not only were they committed to the establishment of the tribunal, but were also obligated to "facilitate" its mission; (2) before a new government would form, the six opposition ministers who resigned in November

2006 would return to the Siniora cabinet and re-affirm the decrees that had been passed in the interim; and interestingly, (3) the introduction of the draft electoral law in parliament.

¶ 8. (C) Berri insisted he had no problem with any of these demands; that in fact, they were reasonable extensions of his own proposal. When Berri was asked about some inconsistencies in his proposed process, specifically, that he would be dealing with the supposedly illegitimate government of PM Fouad Siniora, the Speaker carefully parsed the issue by explaining, with a straight face, that he had "never said the Siniora government didn't exist; merely that it was illegitimate."

¶ 9. (C) He also rationalized the convenient assembling of parliament for a vote on the expected agreements, while currently keeping the doors of parliament closed to debate other matters, by explaining that he had no choice at present because he had never received the necessary summons to convene parliament from President Lahoud, who himself was stymied because he could not receive the necessary request from the illegitimate government of Fouad Siniora. It was clear that this type of circular reasoning did not bother Berri in the least.

¶ 10. (C) Concerning the difficult matters of the presidential and parliamentary elections, Berri maintained that these were affairs for the parliament and should be left to the good offices of that institution. He argued that if the March 14 and March 8 alliances could resolve their differences on the tribunal and the reconstitution of the government (which would give Hizballah, and to a lesser degree Michel Aoun, a greater role in the executive), the other issues that separated the factions could be resolved with relative ease.

¶ 11. (C) But he reiterated that his proposal did not have an indefinite shelf life. At some point in the very near future, the leadership of March 14 had to decide whether to take up his offer. With great emphasis, he asked what they could possibly lose. As long as the tribunal was discussed and resolved before the issue of the government, he argued that March 14 could be assured there would be no surprises. Berri concluded his defense by darkly noting that Walid Jumblatt, and to a lesser degree Samir Geagea, were the only ones who benefited from instability. Therefore, in his view, it would be exceedingly unwise to heed their counsel.

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UNSCR 1747 AND LEBANON

¶ 12. (C) The Ambassador pointed out to Speaker Berri that UNSCR 1747 not only prohibited the transfer, sale, and supply of weapons between Iran and other nations, it also called on member states to report back in 60 days on the status of those sanctions. It was also noted that the U.S. would, with its international partners, be willing to open a dialogue with Iran if it completely suspended its nuclear enrichment program, whose only logical purpose was the development of nuclear weapons.

¶ 13. (C) Speaker Berri conveyed cautious relief that the U.S. and the international community were trying to resolve this serious issue through diplomacy rather than military confrontation. He acknowledged that Iran's actions had dangerously increased tensions in the region and was hopeful that diplomacy would prevail. He said that his long experience in the region led him to believe that any military conflict with Iran would quickly involve the entire region, and once started, would be extremely difficult to control.

¶ 14. (C) Berri recalled a recent discussion with Russia's ambassador to Lebanon and said that they both agreed that due

to the presence of Hizballah and the nature of Lebanon's neighbors, Lebanon would be among the first nations in the region to become deeply involved in an Iran-related war. He acknowledged that "everyone in Lebanon...except Amal" is bringing in considerable quantities of arms and it would not take much to start a conflagration. Berri said he counted himself among those who believed that only the LAF should bear arms and that anything else would eventually lead to conflict. In closing, the Speaker unexpectedly remarked that at the end of their conversation, he reportedly advised UNSYG Ban that the "only way to disarm the resistance was to build up the LAF."

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